

out of the shadow (and into the light) by Iolaire02

Series: [lucky number \[2\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

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Summary:

Down in a top-secret Soviet base, Joyce turns the keys a moment sooner; when the dust clears, Hopper is gone.

He is stuck in the Upside Down; there may be Demogorgons lurking in the shadows, and something is dogging his footsteps, but Hopper is his own worst enemy.

1. devour the sun

Notes for the Chapter:

This is complete, and it's not super long, either - there are seven chapters, and I plan to update every Monday to give myself time to (hopefully) finish up the Steve-centric prequel I'm working on and the sequel I've started. This is technically my first work in this fandom, so my characterizations are likely more than a little off; at this point, the characters are stuck as they are (ie: I'm not going back to change them). Some of these chapters are heavy on the internal monologuing, while others are more dialogue heavy, just as a heads-up if that isn't your thing.

This starts part-way through 3x09, and I changed a few things to make it work. As mentioned in the tags, this is canon divergent, and isn't compliant with the scenes in the end credits or the season four trailer.

Enjoy, and please feel free to let me know what you think!

"No matter what happens," Jim says gruffly over the sound of Henderson's singing, looking Joyce in the eye, "we turn the keys. No matter what, you get me?"

"Hop," Joyce protests, her voice cracking with it, and her dark eyes dart all over his face, taking in his expression. She falters, and it makes Jim wonder what his face is saying that his words didn't.

"No matter what," he repeats harshly. "We've gotta get that gate closed, Byers, and we gotta do it as fast as possible." His mouth sets itself in a grim line, and Joyce's shoulders slump.

"No matter what," she repeats reluctantly.

Satisfied, Jim continues his impatient pacing. He wants to snap at

Henderson, who is *still* singing a surprisingly lovely duet with the girl who could tell them Planck's Constant if she would just *stop singing*. They don't have time for this, but even so Jim knows that this is the fastest way to get the code. Damn Murray, really.

They don't have time for this. El and the rest of the kids are still up there, out in the open, and Jim is in a secret Soviet base, far below them. If they're in trouble, he can't help them.

He wants a cigarette; it'd help calm him down a bit. He almost turns to ask Joyce if she's got one, but then the duet starts winding down, and Henderson's girlfriend – it's odd to think that the Henderson kid's got himself a girl when Jim... doesn't – says, "Planck's Constant is six point six two six zero seven six times ten to the negative thirty-fourth Joules per second," and Jim lunges towards the keypad to punch the digits in before he forgets – he can already feel the numbers slipping his mind, but then he's never really been one for numbers – and the door clicks open, thank god.

Jim grabs the case out of the safe, spins on his heel, and runs towards the control room with Joyce hot on his heels.

Somehow, it is easier than he would have expected to get everyone out of the room. Jim supposes that a fear of guns and gunfire and lunatics firing said guns must be universal, but it doesn't really matter, does it? He's managed to get the Soviets out of the way; the room is empty, save for Jim and Joyce and a whole bunch of buttons.

He flips the case open and stares down at the two keys lying innocently inside. It's bizarre to think that these tiny little things are what will cause the drill to self-destruct.

It's strange that *this* is what will end it all.

He and Joyce each walk over to a consol. The key slips inside so easily that he can't help but think that maybe everything will go right for once. Everything is set to go when Grigori appears from fucking nowhere and ruins everything, because of *course* he does.

Jim watches from his place on the ground as Grigori tosses Joyce across the room; he staggers to his feet and launches himself at

Grigori's back while he's momentarily distracted, throwing him off balance. Unfortunately, Grigori rights himself quickly, and Jim quickly finds out that shoving him up against a wall isn't enough to beat him in a fight; it just makes Grigori angrier than he already was, and Jim ends up with a fist in his face and pain blossoming beneath the force of Grigori's knuckles.

Somehow, between Grigori's fist knocking him to the floor and Jim's elbow jumping backwards into Grigori's face, they end up staggering out of the control room and down the steps of the catwalk that wraps around the drill, still trading aggressive punches, still grappling furiously for the upper hand.

Grigori shoves him, and Jim almost topples over the railing. A few punches later, and Jim is spitting blood out of his mouth as he glares daggers at Grigori. He wipes his mouth, beckons his enemy forward, and puts his fists back up in front of his face.

Jim worries about their proximity to the drill as he and Grigori stagger around it, lurching terrifyingly close to the thing, almost rolling over the railing when, for a heart-stopping moment, it becomes difficult to keep his balance, when it becomes difficult to plant his feet because they're both lunging for each other so hard, offering little thought to the dangers of their surroundings because the primary danger is their opponent.

It is Jim against Grigori, it is red and white and blue against red and gold, it is a race to see who can hit hardest and fastest. It's a fight to see who can win.

Finally, Jim gets Grigori on his back beneath him, and he sends stabbing punch after stabbing punch into his chest, the force of them enough to cause Grigori to jerk involuntarily against his fists before his leg comes up to sweep Jim off of his feet and onto his back.

He is half off the catwalk, his head far too close to the rapid spinning of the drill. Jim cannot take his eyes off of it, the fear strikes him so deep in his heart.

No matter what happens, he remembers telling Joyce, *we turn the keys*. He kind of regrets it, now, when he is so close to the drill that will

explode when she turns the keys. He never *really* considered that he might not make it out of this alive, and when Grigori leaps forward and plants his foot on Jim's throat, he thinks that if he dies, he'll at least be taking this Soviet bastard with him.

Grigori looks down at him dispassionately as Jim struggles to draw breath against the pressure on his trachea. His eyes are emotionless.

Through the thundering sound of blood rushing to his head, through the overwhelming, fearsome whirring of the drill, Jim thinks he can hear the sound of the walkie talkie crackling from the control booth.

He thinks maybe it's time to close the gate, and he hopes Joyce is ready, hopes she'll take his *no matter what* to heart, because he won't make it out of here whether or not she turns the keys. She may as well close the Upside Down so that Jim can feel like he's accomplished something.

But... it feels like it's taking too long, and so Jim reaches up, and he fights against the pressure on his throat. He gets Grigori off of him, bashes his face against the drill before he jerks back. Jim pushes him against the railing, refusing to let him get the upper hand again; he digs his thumb into Grigori's shoulder, snarls, "I'll see you in hell," at him, and swings the man while he's off balance, throwing him into the drill.

The machine spits electricity from it, blocking him from the control booth, and Jim chances a glance at the sinister red glow of the Gate before he turns to look back at Joyce, already nodding, already mouthing the words, "*Do it.*" She meets his eyes, nods, and turns the keys.

No matter what happens, Jim thinks with some regret as he stumbles backwards. The drill glows white hot, electricity surging out of it as it spins faster. For a split second, the red of the gate expands, as though the energy from the drill is splitting it open wider. Jim lunges toward it, leaps through the air, feels the heat from the machine's explosion against his back, burning away at the fabric there, burning away at the skin as the pent-up pressure propelled him toward the Gate.

All of a sudden, the world in front of him is dark and sinister – it is

something out of his memories-turned-nightmares. Jim hits the ground hard, his arms and legs screaming in protest as he lands and just barely manages to turn it into a roll.

When he finally stops moving, Jim thinks that he can still see a red glow seeping along the vines that spread along before him. He turns toward it just in time to see the edges of the Gate knitting themselves back together, shutting the light out of the Upside Down; it's almost like a solar eclipse, except with those, the sun tends to come back. Down here, it's like the mouth of the Gate is eating the light, consuming it, dragging it down into the darkness that will never let it go free.

It closes faster than it did back when El first closed it in November, and Jim wonders if it's because a machine opened it this time around, or if it's because it wasn't open for over a year before it was closed.

Either way, the Gate is closed. The Gate is closed, and Jim is locked on the wrong side of the Upside Down with a blistered back, a bloody face, a sore throat, and possibly some broken bones.

This is fucking fantastic; Jim is stuck in a place that despises heat and water without either of those things on hand; he's injured; and at the moment, his chances of survival aren't looking good.

Jim reminds himself that he's been in the Upside Down before. He can do this. He can survive here without any basic human necessities. It's not like the Mind Flayer made it back through the Gate, so at least he doesn't have to worry about that.

He just has to worry about Demogorgons and Demodogs and Demo-whatever-elses. It'll be fine. If Will Byers – a kid without any formal training of any kind – could survive down here without any prior knowledge of the place, Jim will be perfectly, totally fine.

He's just gotta let everyone know that he's alive. That's all. Just let them know he's alive, and then they'll figure out a way to get him out of here, and then he can be back where he belongs, with Joyce – who probably thinks he's dead – and El and the kids.

Jesus. If – *when* – he makes it out of here alive, El is going to kill him.

Or, no. El will give him the silent treatment, and given how quiet it is down here, that'll be worse.

2. darknesses in life

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for the lovely comment and the kudos! I'm sorry to say that there isn't any Steve & Hopper bonding in this chapter or the next one. To make up for it, kind of, I'll be posting two chapters today so that there is a chapter with Steve and Hopper in it next Monday.

Enjoy, and let me know what you think!

He wallows for a few minutes before he finally comes to terms with the fact that if anything is going to happen in this god-forsaken land, he's going to have to be the person to do it. He sighs heavily, dreading everything that will be involved in surviving this. He kind of just wants to sit on the ground, surrounded by vines that will inevitably crawl up his body and suffocate him.

He's done so much already. He's dealt with this parallel universe bullshit three times too many, and now he's stuck in the lightless, soulless version of Hawkins. He's alone; he knows that much. The Gate is closed, and El and Joyce and the kids are all safe; the Mind Flayer was outside the Gate when it closed, so it would have died; whether it was in Hargrove at the time or not, the kids have one less problem to worry about. His being here ensures that, because he's alone, cut off from the people he loves, and he thinks that maybe he's done enough already. Maybe it'd be okay to just sit here and let the vines do what they want.

But –

He can't help but think that El would be disappointed in him if he just gave up without even trying. He remembers that Will must've fought to survive; he's sure that Barb Holland did as well. How can he do any less, especially when he's got a kid waiting for him on the other side, and the promise of a date with Joyce on Friday at seven o'clock?

Jim fights his way to his feet, grimacing at the pain that lances up his back, that pulls at his face, that constricts around his throat, that jabs through his arms and legs.

First things first. Jim's gotta patch himself up as well as he can if he wants to make it through this, which means he needs to make it out of this underground lair, out of Starcourt fucking Mall, and through the streets of Hawkins to the hospital, because Jim sure as hell doesn't have the shit he needs to fix himself, and even if everything in the Upside Down is rotten and putrid, the hospital's his best bet for finding any of the stuff he needs.

Jim realizes about five minutes later that getting out of her is going to be far more difficult than he had first assumed. For one thing, he didn't exactly memorize the way in, and Murray is the one with the map. Of course, Murray not being here, this doesn't help Jim any. He's not sure how much the map would have helped anyway, given that the drill's explosion seems to have collapsed the catwalk up to the control booth.

"Fucking fantastic," Jim grumbles, kicking his foot out at the remnants of the drill and instantly regretting it when the painful sensation vibrates through his leg. "How the hell am I supposed to get outta here?"

The warped, vine-tangled metal doesn't offer a reply. Jim huffs loudly into the dead air and surveys the wreckage around him. He wonders, with a sort of repulsed reluctance, if he can use the vines that have crawled over every available surface to pull himself up onto the detritus that was once the catwalk, and – having come up with something resembling a way out of this hell-hole – resolves to try it.

Jim wanders over to some of the sturdiest-looking vines, wraps a hand around one, and gives it a solid yank; he makes a face at the slimy feeling of the invasive plants – no one is around to see him, at least; the creeping plant holds against the force he applies and despite the repellent texture, his hand doesn't slip. Jim sighs: he was kind of hoping that he'd have to find another way up and out, but he has realized that things rarely go the way he wants them to.

Annoyed, Jim gives the creepy crawly vines one last frustrated yank, just because. Then, he wraps the gross appendage around his hand, and begins to pull himself upwards, struggling to find footholds in the metal lurking behind the vines.

He wonders why it's so damn hard to scale vertical surfaces; it really makes his experience more unpleasant than it'd otherwise be. Zero out of ten for hospitality and comfort, really. Do the Mind Flayer and Demogorgons have something against, like, human trappings and basic comfort?

He could really use a drink or a smoke right about now, but his borrowed uniform has neither, and anyways, he's a bit preoccupied with climbing this damn wall.

It takes longer than he'd like, and he's glad that no one is there to see him struggle up a wall, but he finally makes it to the top. He staggers to the control room on sore legs. His entire body is aching, really, but he thinks that he can at least rule out the possibility of broken bones if he's managed to use his arms to climb and his legs to walk. If he's wrong, he'll just deal with it later.

Now that he's in a place that is semi familiar, Jim thinks that maybe he'll be able to back-track. He may not have Murray's map, but he does have a functional brain, even if said brain is what got him into this situation in the first place.

Jim trudges through the long, winding hallways of the Soviet base wishing that he had a vehicle because he's kind of over walking and other forms of physical exercise. Unfortunately, he has not had good experiences with relaxing in the Upside Down; he knows that Will was fine and assumes that the kid was able to get some rest while he was down here, so he doesn't know if it's just a *Jim Hopper* thing that means that vines try to strangle him the second he tries to take a break.

Maybe it was because he'd been trying to dig his way out of the tunnels after he'd smashed his way in. He knows that some things don't like being attacked, or whatever. So maybe the vines had just been retaliating, but Jim still doesn't trust them.

The walk to the elevator is unnecessarily long, but Jim gets there eventually. Of course, it's only after he's pushed the button to close the doors that he realizes the problem. There's no fucking electricity in the Upside Down, and there's no other way out of this fucking base, either. At least, there's no other way that Jim knows of.

He slumps down to the floor of the elevator and leans against the wall that is in the perfect location for him to bang his head against it in frustration. "You've gotta be fuckin' kidding me," he growls furiously. He stares up at the ceiling of the elevator miserably and doesn't bother trying to stifle the groan that escapes him at the sight of the grate there.

The last thing he wants to do right now is climb up an elevator shaft, even if it is his only way out. He'd rather get strangled by vines, which is a very real possibility. He can already feel them creeping forward in a mockery of an embrace. He shrugs them off with some disgust and stumbles to his feet before shoving the grate aside and heaving himself up to stand on top of the elevator.

The climb up the elevator shaft is even worse than the one up to the catwalk; his hands start bleeding part way up; he thinks about just... letting go, at one point, and then he thinks about how disappointed El would be if he just gave up; he thinks he's maybe a quarter of the way up when his muscles start burning, but he doesn't think he's got the ability to climb back down, and he doubts the vines would let him live through any rest he attempted to take, so he continues his shuffling climb, pulling himself up the braided metal ropes when the ladders mysteriously disappear. It reminds him a little bit of Chutes and Ladders, except it's real life, and not fun, and there're no slides involved; instead there are never-ending ladders except for when they do end, and there're metal cables dangling from the ceiling he can't see, and there're vines crawling over everything in a desperate bid to keep him from reaching his goal.

He just wants to get to the goddamn hospital. Is that so much to ask?

Apparently, now that the Mind Flayer is (presumably) gone, the Upside Down has a benevolent ruler. Jim makes it out of the ruins of Starcourt, down the various streets of ghost town Hawkins, and into the deserted hospital without any issues. He doesn't even see any

Demodogs lurking in the surplus of shadows as he makes his trek.

In another stroke of luck – which Jim refuses to attribute to whatever being now oversees the Upside Down, given that he's stuck here without any way out – he manages to find some ointment for the burns on his back, and some bruise cream for his throat. He can't do much for his face, and his arms and legs aren't broken, just sore, so he slathers the various creams on, wraps his burns with some thankfully uncontaminated gauze, and pockets the tubes of ointment. Then he goes in search of different clothing; for some reason, he doesn't love the idea of wandering through the Upside Down – and possibly ending up back in Hawkins in the future – in a Soviet uniform. There's also the fact that the back is missing, thanks to Jim's near miss with the drill, and the Upside Down is not the warmest of places, even in what he assumes is probably summer, given how uncannily similar to Hawkins the place looks.

Every time Jim has been here previously, it has always struck him as odd that the Upside Down is such a perfect copy of Hawkins. He always wonders why it's Hawkins. Why not some major city? But then, Jim figures, maybe if he walks far enough, he'll find himself in the shitty mirror version of Indianapolis, or Chicago, or Los Angeles, or Vegas, or even New York City. Maybe the Upside Down is always Hawkins because that's where he's always entered it from.

Jim makes a mental note to not walk to the USSR – it would suck to be there if a gate opened; Jim has dealt with more than his fair share of Soviets for someone who works as the police chief in some random nowhere town in the middle of the States, and he doesn't really want to get spit out surrounded by more of them.

It gets him thinking, though. If the Upside Down really is an alternate universe's version of the world he knows and has a love-hate relationship with, where the hell are all the people? He's seen Demodogs and Demogorgons and repulsive, creepy-crawly vines, a distinct lack of food and water, and zero humanoid figures. If the Upside Down is basically evil-Earth, shouldn't there be, like, evil people, too?

Jim brushes the thought off. He's got enough problems to deal with without adding potentially evil people to the mix. What he needs

right now is to survive this god-forsaken place, and to do that, he needs to figure something out for water and food and weapons.

He looks around himself. All he can see is gross Upside Down-ness; the hospital probably doesn't have much in the way of consumable items – and even if it did, Jim is very aware that hospital food is repulsive without adding the Upside Down into the equation – or weapons. He snags various bottles of medications, a first aid kit, and a rusted scalpel that he finds lying on the floor – either someone was doing surgery before everything went to shit, or someone tried to defend themselves from a Demo-something-or-other (Jim wishes he could scoff at such naivety, but here he is, picking up a scalpel to defend himself from monsters – before he leaves the hospital behind and heads for Bradley's Big Buy.

Notes for the Chapter:

Don't worry, I am well aware that it would be extremely not possible to get out of an elevator shaft like Hopper did. My only explanation is that this is fiction?

Thanks for reading!

3. child do you fear the dark

Notes for the Chapter:

There is a quote from *Anne of Green Gables* in here. It's also technically from the show, but L.M. Montgomery said it first.

There is a little bit of "psychological horror" at the end of this chapter; I'm not sure if it's actually psychological horror, but I'm not sure what else to call it.

After raiding the canned goods at the supermarket, and finding several unopened bottles of water (he supposes that it makes sense that the plastic surrounding the water would be protected from the poisonous environs, just like canned foods and other non-perishables seem fine when unpackaged things have rotted to hell), Jim trudges towards his house; he feels on edge, like he's being watched, but whenever he stops walking to look around himself, there is nothing there; he doesn't even spot any Demodogs or Demogorgons, and it seems as though his only company is to be found in the ever-present vines that have apparently developed invisible eyes.

He is unpleasantly surprised by the creatures that greet him when he steps foot into the cabin in the woods. A Demodog is lurking within the confines of the walls; it is extremely territorial and defensive, and Jim finds that he doesn't want to find out if a scalpel is enough to kill the creature. He beats a tactical retreat to the decrepit old trailer that he lived in before he lured El into his life with Eggos and Jim Croce.

He shakes away the memories of El; he can't afford to get distracted here, not when there are monsters in the unlikeliest of places. *Damn*, though, he misses her.

Jim is inordinately pleased to find that there is nothing lurking in the shadows of his trailer. He's still pissed that there was a Demodog in the place he shared with El, but there's no helping that. Even better than the empty house is the rifle he finds in the corner, and the box of ammo sitting relatively untouched on the shelf.

It would be better if there was a flamethrower or even a box of matches lying around so that he could light up the Demogorgons – he has gotten tired of wasting bullets on the fuckers, and fire seems to be the most effective method of ridding the world of the creatures; unfortunately, the only Zippo he can find in the house won't light, and Jim has never been one to keep matches in his house or on his person – a fact that he is starting to regret.

Jim wonders if any of the kids' houses would have matches or working lighters. He figures it can't hurt to take a look; he figures his best bet is to check Joyce's houses first, since he knows she smokes; he remembers that Max's older brother – the Hargrove kid – smokes, too, so maybe that's a good backup plan if Joyce's doesn't pan out.

He wonders what time it is, or what day it is; it feels like it's late, but that might have something to do with the fact that it was night before he ended up here. Jim finds that he is exhausted, and so he looks for the least evil-plant-infested part of the trailer and tries to get some sleep. It only kind of works; he dreams of a Demogorgon – possibly the largest he's ever seen – attacking Joyce, and that quickly transitions to images of El dying, and the kids getting hurt, and that switches to memories of Sara looking pale and wan with an oxygen mask on. It is only when he hears the heart monitor stop beeping that he realizes two things: she has none of the corn-silk hair that curled around her ears before she got really sick, and she is dead.

He wakes up, his heart racing and his limbs shaking. He is filled with the sort of frenetic energy that only follows his worst nightmares. He swallows around a quivering breath and finds it within himself to be grateful that he didn't dream of 'Nam.

Even with his excess energy, the walk from his trailer to the Byerses' is longer than he expects, and he realizes that he's never actually walked there; he always showed up in his car. It turns out to be a good thing that he doesn't have his car: it always announced his arrival, and that was never an issue when it was *people* living in the house. Now, though, even his heavy footsteps are not enough to alert the Demogorgons– two of the beasts, all things told – of his presence; it's also lucky that he managed to clean up whatever blood was on his person back at the hospital because they don't smell him, either.

He wonders why the creatures are here; last time he was here with Joyce, there was only ever the one Demogorgon, and it spent half its time in the real world until Jonathan, the Harrington kid, and the Wheeler girl managed to kind of kill it. Jim decides to wait the monsters out; maybe if he watches them long enough, he'll figure out what the hell they're doing. And if they do leave, he'll be able to look for fire; hopefully, if they find him, his gun will be enough to kill them.

Jim sneaks around to the back of the house, and he watches through the windows as the Demogorgons mill about the rooms; their behavior is unlike anything he has seen so far: one of the creatures paces the length of the corroded kitchen before moving into the vine-covered living room, where the other one is sort of sitting on the rotted piece of furniture that Jim thinks is the couch. They chitter at each other for a moment, the sound grating to his ears, filled with squeals and shrieks as it is. Then, the Demogorgons make their way to the open front door and rush down the driveway before turning onto the street. They move too quickly for Jim's eyes to follow, and soon enough, they are out of sight.

With the monsters gone, at least briefly, he scours the house for anything that will allow him to light a fire; the vines haven't tried to grab him and choke him yet, but Jim has vivid memories of the ones that traced the tunnels beneath Hawkins; he knows that the repulsive plants will eventually come for him, and that is without taking the Demogorgon infestation that seems to be running rampant into account. So. His first order of business is finding matches, or a lighter, or a flamethrower as quickly as possible.

There is a half-empty box of matchsticks in one of the drawers in the kitchen, but other than that, there is nothing to help Jim in his endeavors; he notices a bowl of rotting fruit on the counter, and there is more putrid food in the fridge, which he notices is unplugged. There are tiny little vines coming out of the outlets and wrapped around the metal prongs of the plug, so he figures that can't be helped. It makes him wonder, though. What would happen if the fridge was plugged in. Would it work?

He keeps the idea in the back of his mind; maybe it'll help him get out of here in the future, but right now he needs to focus on

surviving this accursed place. With his box of matches safely in his pocket, Jim makes a swift getaway; he doesn't need to tempt fate by staying here any longer than necessary, not when he knows that Demogorgons live here.

He stops by the Hargrove house, hoping he might be able to find something fiery there; when he arrives, though, there are two Demogorgons and a Demodog haunting the place. He sighs in exasperation and decides to try one of the other kids' houses.

Jim doesn't know much about their families, he realizes. He knows Henderson's mother is a doting parent, and that his dad is outta the picture; he thinks that Sinclair's got a younger sister and both parents, and he knows his mother's a doctor at Hawkins Memorial Hospital. Wheeler's also got both parents and two sisters; he knows that Karen doesn't smoke, but he's not sure about Ted. Either way, he doesn't hold out much hope for finding matches or a lighter in any of their houses, which leaves Harrington's house.

He knows even less about Harrington than any of the other kids; what he does know is what everyone in town knows: Harrington's parents are never home, and Harrington himself used to be a douche but has reformed in the past year and a half. He thinks Harrington used to smoke, and knows the kid'll probably still have that nail bat that Henderson has talked about to Wheeler who told El who told Jim. He supposes he might as well snag that; god knows the third and fourth-hand praise he's heard about it makes the monstrosity appealing.

Jim makes his way to Loch Nora, which is a ridiculously far walk from Old Cherry Lane, and it brings him past the Wheeler and Sinclair houses, so he makes a half-hearted attempt at looking for fire starters, but the former has five Demogorgons in residence, and the latter has four, so neither place is really worth his time.

Harrington's place is ridiculously large, and there is only one Demogorgon inside. Jim manages to sneak up on it and use one of his matches to burn it to the ground. The fire has the added effects of burning away some of the vines and warming up the dead air of the Upside Down enough that Jim is no longer shivering constantly.

He ransacks the house and is pleased to find a frankly massive stash of canned goods and bottled drinks in the pantry; several boxes of matches in one of the kitchen drawers; the nail bat in what he assumes is Harrington's room; and, amazingly, a flamethrower hidden in a dark corner of the basement.

He makes a mental note to thank Harrington for being so well stocked when he gets out of the Upside Down; he doesn't know why the kid has all this shit in his house, but it has increased his chances of survival drastically.

Jim decides to stay put for the time being; as far as he can discern, he is safe from Demogorgons here, and there are enough weapons, food and water to last him for a while. There's no point in giving up a good thing, and this is probably about as good as it gets in the Upside Down.

There isn't a lot to do down here. Jim finds himself bringing his wares into the pantry, which is the smallest room in the house, but is still large enough to be fairly comfortable. It's easy to defend, too. Jim collects some old clothing from Harrington's bedroom and uses one of the matches to turn it into a torch of sorts; he does his best to burn the vines away from the floor and walls of the pantry and shuts the door against them.

For the first time since he ended up here, Jim feels almost safe: there are no Demogorgons in the house, and there are no vines lying in wait to strangle him in his sleep. He opens one of the cans of food, scoops the contents out, and shovels it into his mouth with his fingers; then he cracks open one of the water bottles and drinks half of it before coming up for air.

It's interesting, and he hadn't noticed it before, but the amount of ash in the air seems to be less concentrated the longer he is in here. There is certainly less of it than there ever was in the vine-infested tunnels, where the Upside Down spilled out into the real world.

Having consumed some food and water, Jim finds himself relaxing into one of the corners. He feels more exhausted than he has in a long time, and he wonders vaguely if that's because of all the walking he did today, or if the lethargy is just a side-effect of being in the Upside

Down for an extended period of time. He remembers that Will had been out cold when he and Joyce found him, but Jim doesn't know if that was the week in the Upside Down taking its toll, or if it was due to the Mind Flayer getting its greasy, eldritch vines all up in Will's orifices.

He closes his eyes, and the barrier of his eyelids against the outside world doesn't make things much darker than they were before; he lets the cold, lifeless air of the twisted world he's found himself in drag him into unconsciousness.

“She died of fever when I was just three months old. I do wish she'd lived long enough for me to remember calling her mother. I think it would be so sweet to say ‘mother,’ don't you? And father died four days afterwards from fever too,” he reads quietly. His eyes flick up to the little girl laying, half propped up, in the bed perpendicular to him. Her eyes are wide with intrigue, and he feels himself drowning in them.

He wonders about her sometimes. She is so innocent, with her big eyes and her pointed chin and her downy curls; it is hard to believe that she has suffered so much. It is hard to believe that, at the tender age of seven, she will be lost to her parents. It is hard to believe that, at the age of thirteen, she has never known her mother because she was spirited away from the woman the moment she was born. It is hard to believe –

He pauses and looks at the girl in the bed. He cannot tell the color of her hair: is it blonde or brown? He cannot tell the color of her eyes: are they blue or brown? He cannot tell her name: is she Sara or El?

He looks down at the book in his hands, but it is gone, and his fingers are long and curved and gray. They are tipped with talons that look as though they are made for killing.

He returns his attention to the girl in the bed, but she is no longer propped up. She's not there. She is flat on her back, a clear mask over her mouth and nose, tubes protruding from her fragile body; her curls are gone, and there is a machine behind her with a flat green line splitting its face. He hears the monotonous beep, but the sensation of it is dulled by the scent of blood.

He looks back down at his hands. They are still wrong. The clutching claws are dripping with blood. He pushes himself to his feet and chances another glance at the girl.

Who is she?

It doesn't matter. What matters is that she is dead; he tore her apart. He tore both of her apart, and there is blood spilling from her still forms. He can smell it, and he shrieks with joy.

He wants to devour her.

He lunges for her, but she stops him. Her hand – small and fleshy and human – is outstretched; it shakes in the dead air surrounding them, but she stares him down and holds him back.

“No,” she says, her eyes dark and determined. Red stains her hands, pours from her chest, like her heart is bleeding for him. “No,” she repeats, and she looks straight at him.

He can see himself in her eyes: tall and emaciated, a featureless face. He is a fearsome creature, and he roars with the joy of it. His face opens into five parts, revealing a gaping maw edged with thousands of sharp teeth. He lunges for her again, consumed by his hunger, unable to deny his desire to have her.

He roars again, this time in frustration, when the vines that are laced along the walls and floor untangle themselves and wrap around her upper arms, dragging her back and away from him.

She screams, and he thinks that at least she is afraid.

He turns and leaps past the blood-stained bed where she once lay and claws his way through a wall; it seals up behind him, leaving him in a dark place, infested with vines, and scorched air, others like him.

He is home, but that does not quell the hunger and fury that coils within him, waiting for a moment to strike.

He will find the girl, and he will kill her, and he will destroy her.

Jim wakes up, trembling, and whispers into the dark, dead, suffocating air: “I need to get out of here.”

4. defy and define the night

Notes for the Chapter:

There's finally a little Steve & Hopper interaction in this chapter!

Also, this completely ignores the "Three Months Later" portion of the last episode, so keep that in mind. Additionally, there's some kind of hand-wavy stuff that wouldn't work in real life.

Enjoy!

There is a phone in the kitchen, and Jim makes his way toward it. He remembers, back when Will went missing, how Joyce had told him of the odd phone calls she'd gotten – the ones where she could hear Will's breathing and the monster on the other end.

He figures, as he clears the vines away from the cords, that it's worth a shot. He doesn't know how Will managed to call Joyce, but he does know that there was a Demogorgon around him when he did. Jim has the advantage of having killed the only Demogorgon taking up residence in the Harrington house, and he decides that he can figure out how to make a goddamn phone call.

He takes a deep breath. He isn't even sure if the phone'll function, but at least he manages to plug the thing in. Jim lifts the phone off its hook and holds it up to his ear. A sigh of relief escapes him when he hears the dial tone. He tries Joyce's number first, but nothing happens. The same thing happens when he tries any of the other numbers he knows off the top of his head.

He bangs his forehead against the wall and immediately regrets it when he feels the slick sliminess of the vines coating every square inch of the place. He tries to think about Will. He had called his mother – Jim had called Joyce because he'd figured that she's his best bet at getting out, and because she's the person he's closest to, but maybe it isn't about *who* he calls. Will had called his mother, and he'd called her at home, despite knowing that it was likely that she

was at work.

Maybe the phones can only call their counterparts. Jim feels as though he's just had a stroke of brilliance until he realizes that he doesn't know Harrington's phone number. He tries to remember if there was a phone book anywhere when he was exploring the house. He decides that there might've been, but he doesn't remember where, so he resigns himself to scouring the house once again. If that doesn't work, he'll have to go to the library or something.

Luckily, there is a phone book on the top shelf of the shelves in the living room. Jim pulls it down and frees it from the strangulating grip of the vines encompassing it. Deftly, he flips to the H's, running his finger down the names until he finds *Harrington*. There are only seven names, and none of them are *Steve* Harrington. He supposes he shouldn't be surprised, but it is a little frustrating when he realizes that he doesn't know either of Harrington's parents' names. None of the numbers are even remotely similar, either, and so he just calls one after the other, his shoulders sagging each time nothing happens. Finally, though, on the sixth try, the phone rings.

Jim can feel his heartbeat in his throat at the sound of the first ring, and the second. It rings a third time, and then a fourth, and he starts to fear that whoever's on the other end won't pick up, and they'll just leave him in this abyss with the sound of a ringing phone in his ear to remind him that he's all alone.

He's just about to give up and hang the phone back on the hook when someone picks up. "Hello?" comes a crackly, staticky voice. "Steve Harrington speaking."

Jim almost sobs, but he controls himself and says, "Kid, can you hear me?"

"Who is this?" Harrington asks, which doesn't answer Jim's question at all.

"This is Jim Hopper," Jim says slowly, enunciating the words, hoping against hope that Harrington will hear him.

"Hopper?" Harrington's words are fuzzy and cracking again. "We

thought you were dead,” he says dubiously, and then his voice takes on a suspicious tone. “How do I know you aren’t just messing with me?”

“Harrington,” Jim barks in exasperation, “I’m not messing with you. I’m on the other side of the Gate.”

“You’re in the Upside –” Harrington starts, sounding astonished.

Jim interrupts him before he can finish the sentence and say anything incriminating. “Hey! Hey, shut your mouth, kid. You never know who’s listening, alright? But yes. I’m alive, and I’m stuck on the other side, and if you could let the others know, that’d be great. I’d like to get outta here. As lovely as I’m sure your house is, it’s significantly less charming with a dead monster and vines crawling the walls.”

“Yeah, I’ll let them know, Chief,” Harrington replies, sounding amused. He mutters, “Can’t believe you killed a monster in my evil house.”

“Thanks, kid,” Jim says, his voice cracking. He just listens for a second. If he focuses, he can hear Harrington’s breathing, and he can’t deny that it’s comforting to know that he’s talking to a real person who’ll try to get him help. “Hey, kid?”

“Yeah, Chief?”

“What day is it?”

“July sixth. It’s about seven in the morning, which is why it took me so long to answer. Sorry ‘bout that.”

Jim lets out an incredulous laugh. “I’m just glad you answered at all. And that you didn’t hang up on me.”

“Hey, no problem, Chief,” Harrington replies calmly. “I’m gonna go tell the others, now, and we’ll figure something out, alright? Jane’ll be happy to hear that you’re still alive.”

“Yeah, okay,” he breathes, and wishes like hell that Harrington wouldn’t go. He feels like he’s going crazy down here with no one to talk to and it hasn’t even been two full days.

“Hey, Chief?” Harrington’s voice pulls him from his thoughts, and Jim manages to hum out some sort of acknowledgement. “If you want, you can call any time, alright? I’m gonna be home for a while, so I’ll try to pick up when I can.”

“Okay. Thanks,” he replies, and even if the words aren’t all sappy and full of emotion, the tone with which they are delivered is. Jim can’t find it within himself to be ashamed. He’s stuck in a place where he’s gotta be strong a hundred percent of the time. He can allow himself to be weak around people, especially the ones that have even the smallest idea of what he’s going through.

“Yup,” Steve says softly. “I’m gonna let them know now, okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay.”

“Call me whenever.”

Jim clears his throat. “Okay.”

“Okay. Bye, Chief.” The phone clicks, and Jim lets go of a breath that sounds kind of like *bye* if he listens close enough.

Exhausted, he retreats to the pantry where he eats more food, drinks more water, and suffers more dreams when he finally manages to win his fight with sleep.

He is still a monster, but at least this time, his victims are not Sara and El. He can be grateful for that.

This time, he is a monster of a different sort. Or... maybe he is not the monster. But he must be, because only monsters engender this much hate. Only monsters are met with disgust and rage; only monsters are met with bone-breaking fists and breath-stealing kicks. Only monsters deserve to suffer.

“Am I the monster, then?” a girl’s voice asks, and he looks over to her, coughing up blood, coughing up the blood of his father, coughing up the blood of his enemies, and he thinks that she – with her soft dark hair and her big, dark eyes – cannot be a monster.

"No," he forces out through bloody, broken teeth, through gasping breaths. "No. You're not the monster."

She tilts her head at him, curious. "By your definition, I must be."

"No!" he shouts. "You are not the monster. You're just a child."

Her big, dark eyes seem to swallow him whole. They are too old for her youthful face. She looks at him, solemn and sad and serious. "So are you," she tells him softly. "Look."

She points down at the water around them, and he notices that it is dark and so glassy that it reflects his face. It is a face he hasn't seen in a long time, he thinks, soft and small and smooth, with deep blue eyes and dark blond hair.

"What do you see?"

"A child," he murmurs. He looks back at her; she is smiling smugly at him.

"And so you are not a monster, either," she says matter-of-factly. "Only a child." She sits down in the reflective pool of water surrounding them, and he follows suit. "Only a child," she repeats, "but one who has suffered."

"You suffered too," he tells her softly. "You suffered more."

She frowns at him, this strange child with her innocent face and her too-knowing eyes. "We do not compare suffering. I suffered, and so did you. We are not the only ones. But we are children. We do not deserve to suffer. We are not monsters."

"You did not deserve to suffer," he corrects her.

She shakes her head. "Neither of us did," she refutes. "We are both children, and children make mistakes. That does not make us monsters. That does not make us deserving of our suffering."

"Okay," he relents.

She smiles at him. "I read your letter."

“My letter?”

“You and me, we are both growing up,” she says. “You are learning to feel again. I am learning to be a person. We both make mistakes, but we are not monsters. You are not like Papa, and I am not the monster.”

“Yeah?”

She looks at him and nods seriously.

He hugs her. “Alright, kid. We’re not monsters.”

She pulls away a bit, bites her lip. “You called yourself my dad.”

“I did,” he replies, his voice breaking.

“Can I call you dad?”

“Of course, kid. I thought you knew.”

“I know now,” she says firmly. “That is good enough. So I will call you dad, and you will call me Jane.”

“Not El?” he asks curiously.

“El is short for Eleven, and that is a name for a person who does not know they are a person,” she says scornfully. “It is good enough, but Mama called me Jane, and she does not remember me, so I will remember me for her.”

“I’ll remember you for her, too, Jane,” he says.

Jane smiles at him with tears in her eyes. “We are coming for you, Dad.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I wasn't sure what the official explanation was, so this was operating on the assumption that it was *Will* who called Joyce those times in Season 1.

I hope you liked the chapter!

5. that which lieth beyond the stars

Notes for the Chapter:

So we've got some Steve and Hopper and El/Jane and Hopper interaction in this chapter.

There are references to the prequel as well as some mentions of Steve's parents that don't fit in with canon in this chapter, as well. They will eventually be explained.

Enjoy!

“Steve Harrington speaking.”

“Hey, kid,” Jim says, feeling far calmer than he had the day before. “Jane got in contact with me while I was asleep.”

“That’s great!” Steve replies enthusiastically. “We weren’t sure if it would work; her powers have been pretty finicky ever since she got bitten, you know, but I guess it’s only the telekinesis that’s not working out.”

“That’s... not good,” Jim mutters. “Are there any other side effects? And is everyone okay? She didn’t really say much about anything that happened after Joyce closed the Gate.”

“As far as any of us can tell, it’s just that she can’t move shit with her mind. Everyone’s fine, for the most part. Ms Byers was devastated until I told everyone that you called yesterday morning. And then I guess Jane must’ve contacted you almost right after everyone’d gone home, ‘cause I wasn’t there for that part. Um... Dustin and Erica Sinclair are fine, but they were manning Cerebro. Mike and Max got a little bit beat up, but they seem fine, too; Will, Nancy, Jonathan, and Lucas are also good, and Robin is only a little bit traumatized, but that’s pretty much par for the course when dealing with this shit, y’know?”

“How’s Murray?”

“The crazy bald dude?”

Jim snorts. “That’s the one.”

“I mean... he seems fine? Especially now that he knows you’re alive? But I don’t really know him, man, so there’s no telling.”

“Good, good. And, uh, the Mind Flayer was dealt with?”

“Oh! Yeah! It was possessing Hargrove, you know, and I may have crashed into his Camaro with the Toddfather, but that didn’t really do much damage, except to the cars. I’m not super sure what happened after that, ‘cause I wasn’t there for most of it until, like the very end, but Sinclair had fireworks for some reason, and we threw those at the Mind Flayer – not Hargrove, but like, the weird, gross meat-sack of melted people?

“Anyway, then Hargrove was gonna sacrifice Jane, but she said something to him, and I guess the Mind Flayer lost its control on him? And then he, like, stood up between Jane and the Flayer, and he held it off with his bare hands, which was pretty badass. It tried to kill him, but then it kind of lost control of itself and died right before it could. I guess that was when the Gate closed. But yeah, Hargrove is still alive, which Max is pretty happy about, even though he’s a complete asshole most of the time, but I guess he is her brother.”

Jim rolls his eyes. He doesn’t *actually* care about the Hargrove kid, but he supposes it’s nice to know that his tiny little town didn’t lose yet another person to Upside Down related shit-fests. Steve seems fascinated by the kid, though, and Jim wonders if it’s because of the fight they had back in November, or if it’s because Steve had his own redemption story and has somehow become nice enough that he wants someone else to have one.

Either way, Jim thinks that the Hargrove kid’s got a lot of work to do if he wants to be a better person, but he supposes Hargrove is still a kid, and – as Jane drilled into his head while he was asleep – children make mistakes, but they aren’t monsters.

Steve has gone on to talk about the aftermath of the closing of the Gate – apparently, Starcourt exploded, and Jim can’t say he’s too

disappointed about that – without prompting, and Jim chuckles a little. “Jesus, kid. Anyone ever tell you you talk a lot?”

Steve pauses. “Probably,” he admits, and adds, “I just like to make sure that people are listening to me,” in a tone that’s probably a far less jokey than he means it to be.

There’s a story there, Jim thinks, and wonders if he should’ve paid more attention to the kid after his nanny died. He feels like he’s always assuming that kids *know* that they can come to him, but Jane proved to him last night that that’s not the case: she hadn’t known that she could call him dad if she wanted. It’s entirely possible that Steve never knew that he could come to Jim for help because Jim never outright told him.

Jim clears his throat against the sudden wash of shame. He’s not very good at this parenting thing, is he? “I’m listening,” he tells Steve. He doesn’t say, *I should have been listening sooner and I’m sorry I didn’t*, because he doesn’t know if Steve is ready to hear that. Some day, though. Some day he really will listen, no matter how hard it is.

Steve seems to take his words as permission to keep talking because that’s what he does. He talks about Robin, who it sounds like he thinks highly of, and Dustin, who he seems to be extremely fond of – *Maybe*, Jim thinks, *that’s because his parents are never around, or because he wants siblings* – and Erica Sinclair, who he thinks is ridiculously brave and also very manipulative. Jim hears all about Steve’s time in the Soviet base and is glad to realize that Steve isn’t completely traumatized by his time spent there.

He also hears a frankly unnecessary amount about the sailor costumes at Scoops Ahoy, and the customers there, who, according to Steve, are “Even more entitled than I am, Jesus Christ. I mean, am I or am I not the richest person in town? Why do they all act like the sticks up their asses are fuckin’ crowns, man?”

And that’s an interesting way to phrase that, isn’t it? *The richest person in town*, like it’s not Steve’s parents’ money, but then Jim remembers that no one in town’s ever seen hide or hair of the Harrington parents. He doesn’t know why that’s never struck him as odd.

From what Jim's heard, Steve moved to Hawkins back in seventy-seven with his nanny. No one ever saw his parents then, either, and the generally accepted story was that the Harringtons were both very rich and very absent.

But then Steve's nanny – Elda, that was her name; he should've remembered; she'd asked him to look after Steve, after all, and look what a bang-up job he's done so far – had died in seventy-nine, right after Jim had moved back to Hawkins. The parents never came home, and – when anyone bothered to ask, which was rare, Jim knows; for such a small town, the people in Hawkins are never nosy enough, especially when they need to be – Steve had told everyone that his parents thought he was old enough to take care of himself. He'd been mid-way through eighth grade at the time, Jim remembers, and nowhere near old enough to be living on his own, so why the hell had everyone just accepted it?

Clearly, weird shit's been going on in this town for far longer than Jim's realized.

"Why'd you get a *customer service* job if you don't need the money?" Jim asks. That's the other strange thing: who the fuck works a minimum wage job when they live in *Loch Nora*? The people there are all in business this and medical that; they're the richie-riches of town, and they throw extravagant but elegant parties complete with hors d'oeuvres and catered meals and hundred-year-old wines served in dainty crystal glasses, or something. Surprising exactly nobody, Jim's never been invited to those parties.

Steve mutters, embarrassed, "My dad said that someone who's grown up as rich as I have would benefit from the life experience. I dunno. I was more preoccupied with the fact that he was disappointed in who I was than the *whys* of his disappointment, y'know? I kinda always thought he'd be, like, happy to know I was alive." Jim hears him swallow around the bitterness in his voice before he sighs. "I guess it'd be awkward to have your kid show up randomly when you're having dinner with your whole-ass *family*," he spits out the last word like it's personally offended him and sighs again. "It's whatever. He wasn't wrong, anyway. And I met Robin, and she's great, so at least something came out of it."

"I have... so many questions about everything that just came outta your mouth, kid, but I'll let it go for now. You sound like you're done talking about it, and, anyways, we don't know each other well enough for me to poke and prod at your life story." Jim hopes he's made the right move, here; he finds that he wants to know about the kid's life, but he also wants Steve to *want* to talk to him about his shit.

At times like this, when Jim is his own company almost all the time, when he is completely entrenched in the dangers of a world that resembles his own except for how there are monsters instead of people – and, *oh*, he thinks he *gets it*, now – it is nice to be stuck in someone else's head.

Steve pauses on the other end of the phone, and Jim wonders what the kid is thinking. "Maybe..." he says tentatively, "we can talk about it someday?"

"I'd like that if you ever feel comfortable enough to tell me about it," Jim agrees. "For now, though, can you tell me anything about how you guys're planning on getting me out?"

"If they've got a plan," Steve tells him apologetically, "I don't know anything about it. I'll ask, and I'll let you know if they tell me anything the next time we talk, if you'd like."

"Sure, kid." God, but Jim is tired – he's tired of this bullshit place, with its monochromatic color scheme and its homicidal vines and its monster-instead-of-human population. He wishes he could just... get out, and go back to the cabin, and give Jane a fuckin' hug, or something. Unfortunately, that's not an option right now; instead, he's got this other kid that he can't see, and that he doesn't know very well, but that he wishes he'd been there for. *Fuck it*, he decides, and says, "Hey, kid?"

"Yeah, Chief?"

"Two things. Well, three, now. First is a thanks for talking to me. I'm sure you've got other things you'd rather be doing –"

"Not really," Steve interrupts.

“– and I really appreciate you taking the time outta your day. It helps keep me sane,” Jim continues over him. “Second is that I wanna apologize for not being around after Elda died. She asked me to keep an eye on you, and I’m afraid I never really did. I hope you know that you can talk to me about anything, and I’m sorry that I never made it clear that you could come to me for whatever when you were younger, too.”

“S not really your fault, Chief,” Steve mutters. “I doubt I’d’ve come to you even if I *had* known. You’d probably’ve had to come pull whatever the fuck I was dealing with outta me, and that woulda just been painful for everyone involved, ‘specially if you didn’t know what you were getting into.”

Jim sighs. “Maybe so, kid, but I’m still sorry I wasn’t there for you, and I want you to know that I’d like to be here for you now. You don’t have to take me up on it, alright, but the offer is open to you.”

“Thanks, Chief,” Steve tells him, and Jim thinks that maybe the kid is smiling a little bit, on the other end of the phone where Jim can’t see it. He thinks maybe that’s the point: that he *can’t* see it, but he also thinks that he doesn’t really know Steve well enough to be sure.

“That’s the third thing,” he announces, getting back on track, and Steve hums questioningly at him through the receiver. “Quit callin’ me Chief, kid. You can call me Hop or Hopper or Jim, or whatever else you want, but Chief makes me feel like I’ve taken you in for speeding or petty theft or poisoning Merrill’s pumpkin patch or something.”

Steve snorts. “Alright, man, I’ll work on calling you something else, but don’t be surprised if you hear a lotta ‘Chiefs.’ Anyways, I gotta go. Henderson wants me to take him and the other shitheads to the Arcade or something. I’ll see what I can find out about the escape plan, though, alright?”

“Alright, kid. I’ll call you later,” he replies fondly, and holds the phone up to his ear long after it clicks down.

The thing about his phone calls to Steve is that the kid manages to fill up the oppressive silence that comes at Jim from every fuckin’ side

down here. The Upside Down wants to swallow him whole; he can feel it. It wants to twist him up and tie him into knots and make him into all the worst parts of himself: it wants to turn him into the monster he is in his dreams, wants to weave him into this ball of fear and rage and murderous desire, wants to drive him crazy so that he fits in with all the deep, dark crevices; and the air that kills a man as much as the plants; and the people who have turned monster because they've let their bacchanalian, hedonistic, rotten instincts coalesce with their greed and all their shitty morals, and they've indulged in the repulsive behaviors that accompany such a complete loss of self.

It's terrifying to see what humanity can become if they turn to such unrelenting gluttony that the only thing they perceive as truly *wrong* is allowing the morals determined by civilization to get in the way; Jim thinks that the only thing that is more fear-inducing than being stuck in a world where everything is so completely upside-down (and isn't it funny that the kids have so aptly named the place without ever experiencing it themselves?) is being in that same world and *feeling* it as everything in it works, using its considerable strength, to drag him down with it.

The thing about the phone calls with Steve is that the kid manages to pull Jim out of that for a while; it's like every time Jim feels himself about to start slipping, he can call Steve and the kid'll pull him back to safety. Jim thinks that maybe it takes bravery to survive down here, or maybe it's sheer force of will, or both – Jim knows better than most that compressed into Will's tiny, waifish body is an insurmountable flow of courage, and an impressive desire to live – but if Jim makes it out of here not having lost his sense of self, it'll be Steve who saved him. It's hard to allow himself to sink into that wretched state of despair and disrepair when all it takes is a single phone call to remind him of all the good the world has to offer.

Jim's never been one for church or religion, and after Sara's death, he shut out all the lessons he learned at church back when his dad forced him to choose between Sunday School or, later, Sunday Service, and his belt. He thinks that maybe he believed in God after Sara was born, but seven years later, after Sara died and Diane left, he gave up on religion and focused on following and reinforcing the rules the States had chosen for themselves. He's been a little looser

with them in recent years, he knows, but now seems as good a time as any to start following those rules to the letter again, and if he's gonna do that, he might as well add the Ten Commandments in, too. It's not like a little extra discipline'll hurt down here.

He heads back to the pantry in an effort to put this idea of discipline into play and makes it through about ten minutes of sitting before he decides to give up. He's restless, Jim decides. What he really needs is to *do* something. He can't just eat and sleep and talk to Steve all the time, even if all those activities are relatively safe. The only problem is that there's not much to do outside, either. He supposes he could try to read some of the books on Steve's shelves, but the lighting is terrible, and he had enough problems with the phone book; he can't listen to music because – wait. Maybe he *can*. He just has to find a phonograph somewhere in the house. He doubts that Steve has anything resembling good music in his record collection, but it can't hurt to look.

If he really needs to, he can always make the trek back to his trailer and find a reasonable vinyl, but he finds that he doesn't really want to leave the safety of the pantry any more than he absolutely has to.

Steve's record collection and player are fairly easy to find; Jim lugs everything back to the pantry and shuts the door behind him; he's not entirely certain how the Demogorgons' hearing is, and he doesn't want to get killed for listening to music. He sweeps his gaze over the small room, taking stock of the cans of food and bottles of water on the shelves. The vines have thus far stayed out of the space Jim has claimed for himself, but he thinks he can see their shadows poking and prodding at the space below the door; luckily, his matches and flamethrower are still functional if he's ever in need.

Jim flips through the records, making a face at a good chunk of Steve's collection. It's not that the kid has *bad* taste, except... well, he kind of does. At least, the music is shit by Jim's standards, but he realizes that a lot of the kids are listening to this crap now; not everyone can have taste as cultured as Jim does. He has to flip through several Duran Duran albums, some music from The Police, Wham!, Madonna, and Hall & Oates before he manages to find anything even remotely decent – they aren't Jim Croce, but Loggins & Messina and Dan Fogelberg are good enough.

So he puts the music on, and it's got an interesting quality to it. Instead of sounding, like, round and full of life, like he was expecting, it sounds kinda flat and lifeless. It's interesting how the Upside Down manages to suck the life out of everything, even pre-recorded music. And it must be the Upside Down itself, too, because Steve's voice doesn't have that dead quality to it when they talk; maybe that's because Steve's still in the real world, and Jim is stuck down here, where everything hates everything else and itself.

With that lackluster performance on the music side of things, Jim resigns himself to trying to sleep some more. Something he's noticed is that everything is less satisfying here: music is *less*, food has muted flavors, water isn't as thirst-quenching as he's used to, and sleep leaves him more exhausted when he wakes back up.

No wonder the people-turned-monsters turned to such extreme forms of self-fulfillment. If Jim has to stay in this life-sucking place for much longer, he might join them, 'cause he certainly won't have the will to beat 'em for much longer. With that in mind, he finally succumbs to sleep, whose weak and insubstantial arms threaten to drop him at any moment.

"We have been waiting for you," Jane says disapprovingly. She is holding the hand of a tiny blonde girl with big, blue eyes. He chokes on his own breath at the sight. He thinks that this is a nightmare: this representation of what he wants most in the world that will be ripped from his grasp. He squeezes his eyes shut, but the image has burned itself onto his retinas, and there is no escaping it.

When he opens his eyes again, Jane is frowning at him. "You did not know I was here," she deduces, and Jim shakes his head. Her mouth falls open around an "Oh."

"'Oh' what?" he asks.

"You are asleep," she tells him. "I am here in your dreams."

"You were last time, too," he agrees.

"Oh," she says thoughtfully, and then, "Steve says you want to know how

you will get out.”

“That would certainly be nice,” he replies, looking at her curiously.

“I will open the Gate at Steve’s house,” she tells him, “and you will walk out.”

“That... is a terrible idea.”

“Yes.”

“I thought Steve said your telekinesis isn’t working anymore. How are you going to open the Gate without it?” And how is that the first thing that comes out of his mouth when he has other, more pressing concerns?

Jane watches him solemnly with her dark, dark eyes. “The first time I opened it, I only touched the monster. The Upside Down opened its own Gate. I do not need telekinesis to open the Gate because I am not the one opening it. I only contact it.”

“Okay,” Jim drawls, “but the Gate didn’t close itself the first time, either. When you made contact, you were the one who had to close it. How’re you gonna close it again without your powers?”

Her shoulders sag. “I won’t.”

Jim stares at her incredulously. “So you’re just going to leave the Gate open so that the Upside Down can spill out into the world? That’s insane!”

“Halfway happy,” she tells him sadly.

“What?” his eyes narrow in confusion.

“A... compromise,” she explains. “The Upside Down wants to be open. It also wants to keep you. We want the Upside Down closed, but we also want you back. So we open the Upside Down and it is halfway happy when it is open but does not keep you, and we are halfway happy when we have you but the Upside Down is not closed.”

“Okay, no. That’s more like the Upside Down is three-quarters of the way happy and we are one-quarter of the way there. This is a terrible plan, and we need to think of something else, alright Jane?”

She shakes her head vigorously. “There is nothing else. We will find a way to close the Gate later, but we get you out first.”

“Or you could just leave me here and keep the Gate closed. That way you are happier than the Upside Down is, and you don’t risk the entire world just to save me.”

“No,” she says firmly.

“C’mon, kid, you know this is a bad idea. Please, try to think of something else. There has to be another way.” And why the hell is he advocating to stay in the Upside Down longer?

“Dad,” Jane says, and looks down at where she is standing beside Sara, holding her hand. “Please?”

“Please, Dad,” Sara echoes quietly, looking up at him with her huge blue eyes. “For us.”

“You manipulative little –” shit, he finishes in the privacy of his own mind.

Jane looks at him smugly, like she thinks she’s won. This, Jim knows, is why Sara is here. This is why she’s drudged up the memories; she’s trying to manipulate him into going along with her ludicrous plan, and he’s ashamed to say that it almost worked. Fuck. She knows how to play him far too well.

“No,” he tells her firmly. “Figure something else out, kid. That’s final.”

Jane scowls at him, and between one breath and the next, she’s gone.

(Between one breath and the next, Jim has changed from man to monster, and Jane and Sara are back, trying to reason with him as he attacks them for no reason.

He wakes up with a scream trapped in his parched throat, and he shivers and shakes his way through his food, and trembles his way through a song on the phonograph, and does not call Steve.)

Notes for the Chapter:

I am unfortunately not making as much progress as I had hoped on the sequel (or prequel), so there will likely be a delay between the last chapter of this and the first chapters of those, just so you guys know in advance.

6. a dark side to be whole

Notes for the Chapter:

So, fair warning: this chapter is a bit darker than my usual, and it's the entire reason that I used the Psychological Horror tag - I'm not sure if it qualifies, but I wasn't sure what else to call it.

Thank you to everyone who has left comments and kudos; they mean a lot!

Enjoy, and let me know what you think!

He eats and drinks and sleeps his way through the sluggishness of the Upside Down; he loses track of the days and doesn't care that he doesn't care.

Food has no taste; water does not quench his thirst; music grates on his ears; and in his nightmares, he is so monstrous that he feels progressively more rabid and wild each time he wakes.

Most days, after he has eaten and drunk his unsatisfying rations, he paces the pantry, wishing that he could leave the confines he created for himself. Some days, he struggles to remember what the purpose of confining himself is.

He has begun waking from his nightmares with the taste of blood in his mouth; he can't find the energy to stand; sleep takes too much out of him when it is filled with images of his face opening into a toothy flower, when he can smell blood from miles away, and when he follows it, he is always inevitably drawn to a dark forest that crawls with thick, wriggling vines; in a clearing in the forest, the Byerses and Wheelers stand back to back, with Henderson and Sinclair, Mayfield and Harrington flanking them. There are monsters that crawl out of the darkness and circle them, and he is one of them.

Sometimes, he dreams of three men, a woman, and two children trapped in a high-up room in a darkened building that guards the entrance. He dreams of a hopeless escape, of a man going on ahead,

of another staying behind, of heartbreaking success that costs too much. He smells blood and rushes toward it, and when he reaches it, it is fresh and warm, and the screams that he knows deep down that he should pity – he pushes this knowledge away, into the dark recesses of his mind, where he keeps the things the rulers have told him he no longer needs – do not deter him. He looks up for a moment and sees the ones that got away. Something tells him that they are important, but he doesn't know who they are. He turns his attention back to the flesh and blood before him.

There is a weight in some of his dreams, and he learns about fear and rage and hate; he learns that love and joy and goodness are things best hidden away if he wants to stay away from the pain that the General and President bring when they explore the recesses of its mind.

It does not like experiencing pain, nor warmth, or water. Those things are too pure for it, and it much prefers the murky emotions that are so all-consuming that it need not think. It would rather think of blood but there is none here.

The General and President have shown it the darkness as they showed those before it; they have taught it to crawl along the vines of its homeland; they have taught it to engender fear and disgust and hate, and it knows that there is nothing else that matters more than its ugliness.

The President is terrible to it. The President has perfected the artlessness of ignorance and rage and hate. It thinks – and it is certain that the President will disease such perfections within it soon enough, and then it will be truly ungrateful – that the President is consumed with sorrow that is thicker and greater than blood. It desires such sorrow because such a terrible thing must be accompanied by rage and hate.

It is desirous of the ugly emotions that line the wings of death, for only the General has achieved such ignorance. It thinks – soon, it will no longer experience such wretchedly beautiful things, so soon, if only the President would enslave it before it can experience impatience – that the President is jealous of the General.

At the same time, though, it knows – and it should know nothing other than bloodlust and rage and hate, if only it could feel nothing else, if only the President were brutal enough to steal it from itself – that the President hates the General for reaching such utter ignorance. They planned to spread everything evil into those feeble-minded humans who prefer joy over bitterness and love over hate.

It cannot imagine! It makes a habit of lying to itself – it remembers, back before it was ignorant, that it, too, was more desirous of goodness than evil. It wallows in the shame of the thought – *soon, so soon*, it tells itself, though it knows that the President despises it when it tells itself anything at all – and consoles itself with untruths regarding all the evil around it.

There is no blood for it here, and so it sleeps.

The President greets it in its dreams and shows it terrible, horrible things. It rejoices – and such a thing is unforgivable, so it regrets instead – in the humans the President orders it to attack. Their flesh is tender when it punctures the stuff with its teeth, and their blood flows freely into its maw.

It knows – and what a terrible thing to know; the President will be furious when it offers up the repulsive deceit its ignorance has wrought – that it could smell this blood from worlds away, as thick with fear and hate and sorrow as it is.

How terrible this mission is; it dreams of spreading the blight of evil to the minds of the others. It was once like them; it knows that they will one day bathe in the regret that such repulsive beauty brings when they care to remember what they were before they became as ignorant as it.

There is a terrible ringing sound that pierces the fog it is drowning in. It snarls in the direction of the sound, but the noise is persistent and continues to tear through the defenses it erected in an attempt at...

An attempt at something.

The ringing continues, and it crawls toward the sound, hissing and shrieking as it moves closer. The world comes into focus around it as

the sound grows sharper, tinny and piercing as the repetitive ringing continues on and on and on. The tolling stops for a moment, and then comes back, as loud as ever.

The harsh sound is familiar, somehow, and it can't quite think – no. No, no, *no*. It is not *allowed* to think; the President does not *want* it to think. Thinking is *good*, and goodness is...

Bad?

But that makes no sense to it. This is the problem with thinking, it tells itself – and it is breaking another of the President's rules, and that is... wrong? – the problem with thinking is that it goes on tangents. It asks too many questions that it does not need answered. But it finds that it wants to *know*.

But should it know anything other than bloodlust and rage and hate? It knows that the President does not believe so. And then it thinks: believing is for truths, and if the President values lies so greatly, then where does the belief come from?

This is the problem with thinking: the tangents, the ideas, the possession of its own mind. It is meant to be enslaved, just like all the others, in this world and in its own world.

This is not its own world?

The others were meant to be enslaved?

It thinks – and the President would be so *disappointed* – that something is wrong. *What* is wrong, though?

Good is wrong. It knows that. But that is wrong, too. It wallows in its confusion and it *hates* it. It does not like being confused. It does not like hate – and that... makes sense to it. Like and hate do not go together, do they?

It cannot shake the feeling that something is *wrong*, but the ringing is still going. It is confused about everything, but it knows for certain that it wants the ringing to *stop*. The noise irritates it, and it does not *like* being irritated. Irritation is such a negative emotion, and –

What?

Right. The ringing. It wants to make the ringing stop. To stop it, it needs to pick up the...

The ringing stops when it picks up the...

It cannot remember the name.

What is a name?

“Hop?” a... voice – yes, a voice – says through the...

The thing.

“Hop?” the voice repeats and pauses. “You there, Hopper?”

Oh. A name. A *name*. Hop. Hopper. That is its name. Is it an it? It does not think so, because if it *were*, then the voice would be an it as well, and that is too many its. This is confusing. The voice is a...

Boy. Kid. He, the back of its mind supplies. It grumbles; the back of its mind should have stayed where it belonged; there wasn’t so much thinking involved when he was trapped.

“Okay, good,” the voice says, and he wonders *what* is good. There is nothing *good* down here, is there? Goodness is not allowed.

And why shouldn’t it be? he wonders, and then remembers that the President wouldn’t like it. *But the President doesn’t like anything*, he tells himself.

“... Worried about you,” the voice – and if *he* has a name (Hop. Hopper. Jim. Chief), why doesn’t the voice? Why can’t he remember the voice’s name? It’s something like Ste-Steve? Steven. Harrington. Kid. Yes, that’s it! – continues.

“You haven’t called for a while, man,” Steve is saying, “and so I thought I’d try calling you. D’you know, I tried calling the number you’ve got listed in the phone book, first, but then I remembered that you said you were in my house – and why are you in my house, anyways? – and so I tried calling my own phone, and it actually rang!

Like, I could hear it trying to connect, and so I figured I'd try a couple more times, but you never picked up. I called every day, you know, and then you finally picked up! You were really straining my patience, Chief, but man. I'm really glad I finally got through to you. It was totally tubular." Steve laughs quietly to himself, and he – his name is *Jim*, he reminds himself – can hear it through the phone.

He can't remember the last time he heard someone laugh, and it strikes him as such a *joyful* sound. His immediate thought when he hears it is: *The President won't like that*, followed by: *Who gives a fuck what the President likes, the thing isn't even my fuckin' president*.

"Sorry," Steve says, still snickering. "Henderson and Sinclair are still obsessed with that, even though Max told them that they sound fuckin' stupid when they say it. And that was back in, like, November, man."

"What's... what's the date, kid?" Jim manages to rasp before Steve can say something else.

"It's July fifteenth, man. The last time you called me was on, like, the sixth or the seventh. You completely dropped off the map, and I thought you were dead or something. Jane was really worried, too. She said you were pretty angry after she talked to you last, and she checked back in on you after I told her you hadn't called for a couple a' days. She said you were kinda just... huddled in a ball, and that she couldn't see where you were, exactly, and that you weren't talking to her.

"That's not cool, Hop. You don't just go around ignoring your fuckin' kid, alright. You made Jane feel like shit, and I don't care what she did because there's nothing she coulda done that would've deserved that."

"She... visited me?" Jim manages. He hadn't known that, but he supposes that he didn't know a whole lotta things for about a week.

Steve pauses, like he's recollecting his thoughts. When he speaks again, his voice is softer. "Yeah, she did. You didn't know? You're not mad at her?"

“No, I’m not mad at her. I had no clue she was visiting,” he says, laughing sadly. “I had no clue about anything, kid. I kinda lost myself down here. This place is fucked up.”

“D’you...” Steve’s voice gentles significantly; he doesn’t sound like he’s angry anymore, and Jim is beyond grateful: he’s been angry enough in the past week to last him a lifetime, and he doesn’t like hearing such an ugly emotion in a kid’s voice. “D’you want to talk about it?” Steve finishes.

“Not... not right now,” Jim stammers, not quite able to articulate *why*.

“Okay,” Steve says easily. “In other news, then, Jane’s been practicing so that she can close the Gate after we get you out. It was slow going at first, but she’s really getting the hang of it, and we’re planning on getting you out tomorrow; she’s pretty sure she’ll be good then.”

“Really?” Jim rasps, unable to keep the hope out of his voice.

“Really,” comes the soft reply, and then: “I’ll see you soon, Hop.”

The receiver clicks, and Jim is left alone with himself. He knows, though, that he’s never *really* alone down here.

He makes his way back to the pantry and uses the flamethrower to burn away the vines that managed to creep under the door while he lost his mind.

He eats some food and drinks some water.

He does not sleep. Jim is afraid of sleep, now that he’s back in his right mind. The President walks through his dreams and terrorizes him with his worst memories and his greatest fears; he knows what happens when the President gets to a person. He thinks that in some ways it’s worse than when the General gets to someone: the latter makes a person’s body do monstrous things; the former twists a person so that not only do they *do* monstrous things, but they also *become* a monster.

He does not sleep, and so he doesn’t see Jane. He only hears a

breathed-out *tomorrow* before he's alone with his own mind in a world ruled by the Dream Walker, in a world where the people have become Demogorgons.

7. the edge of light

Notes for the Chapter:

Well, it's a bit short, but this is the last chapter! And I did actually get the sequel done (though it's more an extended character study-adjacent thing than a plot driven *sequel*), so that'll be up soon.

Enjoy!

As both Steve and Jane assured him, the Gate appears the next day.

It is a throbbing red glow that opens just outside of the house. Jim stumbles toward it, dreading the fact that he has to leave the pantry nestled within the house that has become his sanctuary. He takes a deep breath and reminds himself that if he could survive the Upside Down, he can survive going through the Gate to get home.

The Gate is in Steve's pool. Jim snorts. That poor kid has terrible luck with pools: a girl disappears into the Upside Down through it, and now a Gate to the same place has been opened in it. Shaking off his thoughts, he leaves the relative safety of the house and shuffles over to the pool area, flamethrower clasped between his hands in case anything decides to jump out at him.

He steels himself and climbs down the ladder into the pool. The Gate is relatively small, and it splits open the side of the pool that is farthest from the house at a fairly low point. Jim makes his way over the slimy vines coating the bottom of the empty pool and stands just outside the Gate.

"Is he coming?" says a muffled voice that Jim doesn't have the energy to place.

"He is coming," Jane replies. "It is safe to come through," she adds, and Jim assumes that she is talking to him.

He steps through and swallows a shit ton of water. Clearly, they thought he could do with some drowning after his time in the Upside

Down, since they didn't think to drain the fucking pool. Jim drops the flamethrower and kicks off the bottom allowing his momentum to push him toward the surface. He grasps the ledge of the pool and coughs up the water he'd swallowed.

"Jesus," he gasps, holding tight to the ground in front of him, "were you guys trying to drown me?"

Hands reach down and wrap around his biceps; they lift him out of the water slowly, until enough of his body is above the water that he is able to slump forward on the paved ground. His legs are still in the pool, but Jim can't find it in himself to care, not when he's finally touching sun-warm concrete that doesn't have any repulsive fucking vines crawling over it.

"Nah," he hears Steve say, "we're hoping that the water'll drown any Demogorgons that try to get through; none of us have seen 'em interact with water, so we thought that maybe they can't swim or something. We figured it'd be too much to ask for the water to actually hurt them."

Jim chokes on a laugh. "'S good to hear your voice, kid."

"Good to hear yours, Hop," Steve replies amusedly. "Now let's get your ass outta the pool, yeah? Robin, come help me out, dude," he shouts, and then he and Robin help Jim get the rest of the way out of the water.

With the kids' help, Jim collapses on one of the lounge chairs; Steve brings him a glass of water and gestures to the plate of sandwiches that's on the table next to him. "Sandwiches," he says redundantly, "if you're hungry."

Jim finds that he is hungry, and so he scarfs down one of the sandwiches while taking stock of his surroundings.

Jonathan and Nancy are standing together by the diving board; Mike – the little fucker – is beside Jane, who is making her way towards him, and Jim doesn't even have the energy to yell at him about it. Max and Lucas are sitting side-by-side on the chair next to him, and Dustin and Will are peering curiously into the pool, which is giving

off an eerie red glow. Joyce is coming out of Steve's house, and when she sees him, her eyes go wide.

"I told you we'd come for you," Jane says, having appeared beside him.

Jim jumps. "*Christ*. Did you learn how to teleport while I was gone, kid?"

"Teleport?" she repeats carefully.

"Move from one place to another instantaneously," Mike explains. Jim scowls at him.

"Oh. No," Jane replies. "I am happy to see you again. Dad," she adds, like it's an afterthought.

"I'm happy to see you, too," Jim says, and hugs her gently.

"Halfway happy?" she asks tentatively.

"All the way happy," he corrects, smiling at her. She smiles back.

"El," Mike interrupts. Sometimes Jim can't stand him. "You've gotta close the Gate now."

"Okay," Jane says agreeably, and offers Jim another smile before she and Mike make their way back to the edge of the pool. She holds out her hands and stares intently at the tear between the worlds. Jim looks away; he's seen her close the Gate before, and he'd rather not look at Upside Down related paraphernalia any more than he absolutely has to.

Joyce sits at the foot of the chair when she reaches him. "I'm sorry," she says, looking as though she's near tears.

"Don't be," Jim tells her. "We agreed that the keys would get turned no matter what happened. You did exactly what we agreed to do, and yeah, I was in the Upside Down for a little while, but we're all alive." He shrugs. "That's what matters."

"I just –" her voice cracks, and she swipes at her eyes. "We all

thought you were dead. *I* thought you were dead, and I thought I was the reason why.”

“Hey,” Jim barks, but it’s softer than it normally is. “There’s no use thinking about that shit, alright? I’m not dead, okay? And the Upside Down sucked really hard, but I don’t regret what we did, okay? I don’t regret it, and you shouldn’t either.”

“Okay,” Joyce says. “I’ll work on it.”

“That’s all I’m asking,” Joyce nods and stands, starting to walk toward Will. Jim catches hold of her wrist. “I’m sorry I missed our date,” he tells her. “Can we reschedule?”

Joyce looks at him critically, and he figures he’s probably not looking so hot at the moment. “Yeah,” she says finally. “Enzo’s. Friday at seven.”

Jim smiles and lets go of her wrist. She walks away.

“Damn,” Steve says over the sound of an argument that’s started over by the pool, and Jim turns to see him smiling faintly. “I guess I’ve gotta spend twelve days in the Upside Down to get a date, huh?”

“Guess so, kid,” Jim says fondly. “Guess so.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I didn't say it explicitly, but the Gate is closed for good.